

# Top Guns

## Bill Emery and his Staff at Kadena Bowling Complex on Okinawa are Shooting for the Stars

The U.S. military has had a presence on the island of Okinawa, part of the Japanese island chain called the Ryukyu's, since the end of World War II. And as it's continued the bases have expanded to include military dependents (families), which led to the development of all the facilities required to accommodate the living, entertainment and recreational needs of the military base community-including bowling.

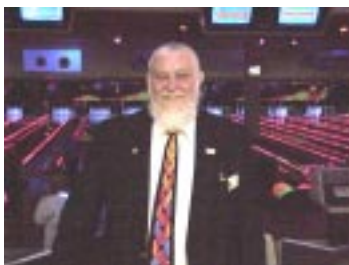
There's a popular misconception in the bowling industry about bowling and the military. The misconception that military centers are very basic functional facilities operated by a non-profit organization that need only offer the minimum in terms of customer service and promotion, and that whatever business they enjoy happens simply because they have a captive audience-the base community.

But, nothing could be further from reality-the military has very high standards for their bowling centers and provide the latest and best in terms of technology and management, and set goals and objectives that are similar (and possibly more clearly defined), than most commercial centers.

And the centers must provide quality customer service since they have just as much competition, (from a wide variety of alternative entertainment and recreation facilities on base) and sometimes more than their commercial counterparts. Military personnel are no less discriminating about how and where they spend their disposable dollars than civilians.

The 46-lane Kadena Bowling Complex comprises two adjacent facilities consisting of All Star Lanes (with 34 lanes) and the Skoshi Bowling Center (with 12 lanes). Both centers feature automatic scoring and AMF bumper systems, synthetic lane overlays, AMF Xtreme lighting packages and special effect sound and stage lighting from Acoustic Waveworks. And, both centers have amusement game areas.

All Star Lanes, which opened in 1950, features a full-service snack bar, bar/lounge and a pro shop. All Star is used mostly for league play, squadron parties and open bowling. Skoshi (which is Japanese for "small center") opened in 1982. It has a small snack bar and is used mostly for adult and youth open bowling, birthday parties and after-school bowling. Both serve a military population of around 6,000, and a civilian population of approximately 18,000.



The complex is managed by Bill Emery, who has been involved there since April 1994, during which time the center twice won the Best Bowling Operation in the Air Force award (1994 and 1997), and more recently won the best PACAF bowling operation award for 1999. Before moving to Okinawa, Bill served 26 years in the Air Force, retiring as a Master Sergeant in 1993 while stationed in Great Britain.

Emery doesn't revel in his success. He always uses the term "we," and defers to the "wonderful staff" he's been privileged to work with. His team at Kadena includes his assistant manager Jim Nagle, operations manager, Tony Warren, programs manager, Paula "PJ" Cota, mechanic foreman, David Blair and promotions/marketing manager Christine Wilkins. All have been certified through extensive training programs that are offered by Air Force, AMF, Brunswick, DBA and Dick Ritger's Bowling Academy. Of course, Kadena has not always been a high-tech modern facility, and features like



bumpers, glow bowling (including glow carpets, masking units, table tops, costume jewelry and a variety of other glow accessories) and a premium sound system are more recent additions. Qubica automatic scoring has recently been installed at Skoshi Bowl and has been a big hit with the youth community because of all the animated graphic displays.

"Every upgrade we've done has helped our business," says Emery. "The investment in improvements has created a more loyal customer base. Since our last project, open play has increased by 30 percent, and our birthday party program has doubled to more than 100 parties each month. We've also been able to increase our prices by around 15 percent."

Price is an interesting subject on a military installation. Bowling fees are typically lower than those found at centers outside the base. But the military center is in an unenviable competitive situation since most other recreation activities in a military community are offered free of charge, with the possible exception of golf (which is more expensive than bowling). But on Okinawa, even though golf's more expensive, the beautiful scenery and weather tend to make people want to unwind outdoors rather than within a bowling center. From a sales and marketing point-of-view, Emery and his staff have their work cut out for them selling bowling to the base constituency.

To help with the task, Emery tries to emphasize service. When a customer walks up to the counter with a problem or a complaint, employees are allowed to use their own judgment to solve the issue. An "External Advisory Council," made up of base personnel serve as an ombudsman between the center and its customers, and Emery meets with the council bimonthly to talk over the results of periodic customer surveys.

"We greet everyone with a friendly smile, remember their names and make sure customers leave our facility feeling good about the service they received," says Emery. "Image is important too, so all of our staff are required to wear uniforms and name tags."

In-house promotions, television and radio advertising and direct mail are all used extensively and effectively as marketing/promotion tools at Kadena. Word-of-mouth advertising has proven to be powerful too. Since the island is so small, and there's only one English-language TV and two radio stations, the advertising message reaches the target audience very easily; therefore they've proven to be very effective mediums to promote traffic in the centers.

Emery and his management team are dedicated to youth bowling education and promotion. "They're our future," he says. "And we must never underestimate both the present and long-term benefits derived from every youngster who has a good bowling experience."



One of the most successful promotions at Kadena is summertime "Earn a Ball and Bag Learn-to-Bowl Classes" for youngsters. This program targets 6 to 12 year olds and runs twice a week for 8 weeks every summer. They can regularly count on 30 to 40 new YABA bowlers from the classes. Kadena's Saturday morning YABA leagues presently fill all 34-lanes at All Star Lanes.

An interesting and profitable youth promotion held at Skoshi Bowl is called "Skoshi Lock-In" This is held quarterly and consists of a literal "lock in" of up to 72 youth from 8:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. for food, fun and all-night bowling. "Ticket sales for the Lock-In program start on the first of the scheduled month, and you have to sign-up early, or you'll be locked out," says Emery.

"Our family focus programs, such as Family Day (where children bowl free if a parent or guardian bowls with them), have become so popular that we've had to move it from the Skoshi Bowl to the larger All Star Lanes," Emery says. "And all of our youth programs produce a new and measurable customer base."





Learn-to-Bowl classes for bowlers of all ages are an extremely important aspect to building the centers' business. "Quality instruction at all levels is critical to bowler development. We offer three different instructional programs, and have observed that when someone is able to do something, or is able to do something a little better, they keep coming back," he adds.

Kadena has two qualified Learn-to-Bowl instructors under contract who charge customers a fee to attend classes, a fee that's subsidized by the center. All employees are trained to encourage bowlers to sign up, and there's a sign-up book at the reception counter that also advertises and explains the various classes.

The instructors check the book every day, and make follow-up calls to the bowlers who have signed up to discuss which program they need, and to schedule them into a class. In a typical week there will be between three and five classes.

"We tie our promotion programs into our pro-shop operation too," says Emery. "Our pro shop, which is always open the same hours as the centers, is headed up by an Okinowian pro bowler called Yoshi. He handles all measuring and drilling, and we offer a walk-in, buy, measure and drill same-day service. Ball drilling is free and we offer three free games with every ball purchased and an invitation for lessons with our Learn-to-Bowl instructors. We also offer to pick up half the instruction fees.

The food and beverage operation at the complex is an integral part of the business. Skoshi Bowl's smaller snack bar focuses on pizza and drinks, but the larger facility at All Star Lanes has a larger menu including soups, salads, burgers and fries, as well as Asian dishes such as chicken stir fry, taco rice and soba soup.

The All Star snack bar seats 100 customers and is promoted separately from the center through television and radio advertising. As a result, the snack bar has developed its own customer base in addition to bowlers. "We also try to get the people who come for the food to bowl," says Emery. "For example, our Monday through Friday lunch specials include a main course, soup or salad, vegetables or fries and a soft drink, as well as two free games of bowling.

"Since most people don't have time to eat and bowl during their lunch breaks, the free games can be redeemed anytime during the month, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. This way, they may choose to bowl during their lunch one day. Similarly, we offer a breakfast special that includes one free game."

As in nearly every government operation, revenue and cost records are carefully recorded. Emery has departmentalized the business into six cost centers. These include fees and charges, telephone cards, snack bar sales, pro shop sales, bar/lounge sales and arcade income. Each department has its own profit and loss statement and the managers are individually responsible for keeping their department profitable "This gives us better tracking and accountability," says Emery.

What does the future hold for the complex? "We plan to make both centers smoke free, with the exception of designated bar areas," he says. We also intend to maintain our high standards for our employees image and dress codes, customer service and equipment. We plan to continue improving the infrastructure of the centers, adding a soft play area at both centers and provide nurseries and continue to work on more youth programs to generate an even greater traffic."



Last, but not least on Emery's agenda is to "Train, train, train our personnel. We need to do this not just here but through the industry as a whole to improve our image. Many centers have modernized, but we also need to see if our employees have 'modernized' by emphasizing service and courtesy. We should take this as seriously as the need for new capital equipment products if we are to compete."

*Article from "Bowling Industry" magazine; reprinted by permission*